Mbiyimoh Ghogomu: A Life Narrative Woven Into IBM Storytelling

February 25, 2020

By Elissa Gootman

As content and strategy lead for the IBM Research brand team, Mbiyimoh Ghogomu, 28, functions as a chief storyteller. He finds ways to draw the world's attention to the groundbreaking work of the global network of scientists, engineers, designers and other creators within what he calls IBM's "innovation arm."

"I create content, but my actual skill is quickly understanding things and helping other people understand them," he says. "One of the most rewarding things for me is helping really smart people articulate themselves in a way that's approachable."

Ghogomu interviews researchers until he fully understands their work, then translates their highly technical language into larger vision statements capturing how IBM sees the future of fields like quantum computing, AI and cloud.

The content he creates may come to life online (including on a revamped IBM Research website, currently in the works); in keynote addresses that researchers give at conferences; in social media posts, or through in-person experiences designed to give clients or the public a taste of tomorrow's technology.

DAVID AVILA*Mbiyimoh Ghogomu, during IBM Design's Intern and New Hire Bootcamp in 2018.*

"IBM Research does amazing work, but there's a gap in terms of our ability to communicate that to the outside world," he says. "We want that 'innovation halo' to be more pervasive."

The Highest of Standards

Ghogomu was born in Cameroon in 1991, the youngest of five children of a Cameroonian father and a Midwest American mother (the couple met at Northern Illinois University). When Mbiyimoh (his name, pronounced BEE-moe, means "One World") was two and a half, the family moved to the U.S., eventually settling in Houston.

"My parents had very high standards," he recalls. "You needed to excel in school all the time, no excuses."

A top student and basketball star, Ghogomu was recruited to play for Dartmouth. But after turmoil with the team caused by a coaching staff in flux, he decided to return to Houston after his sophomore year.

Back home in 2012, Ghogomu found himself craving intellectual stimulation. He turned to the Internet, but found too few resources for people who were eager to learn more about the world, but lacked baseline knowledge on major topics.

So he teamed up with a childhood friend to found The Higher Learning, a website supplementing curated news stories with key explanations. "So much of the content out there makes people feel stupid, and that's why people disengage," he says. "Our whole thing was, 'We want to make you feel smart.'"

Soon after, he enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, majoring in sociology and minoring in journalism.

An Innovative Lens on Diversity

A few months after Ghogomu graduated, in 2016, he heard from a friend, Collin Vaughn, who had just joined a new IBM "design thinking stories team" as a visual and UX (user experience) designer. Vaughn told him about an internship opening at IBM's flagship Design studio in Austin.

"He said, 'Our job is to tell stories about teams using design thinking, but we don't really have any storytellers,'" Ghogomu recalls, adding with a laugh, "I made it clear that they had no choice but to hire me."

Three months into the internship, he was tapped to manage and own all content around IBM's presence at the 2017 South by Southwest (SXSW) conference. Based on the success of that work, he was asked to help create in-person experiences introducing people to the capabilities of IBM's Watson AI platform.

DAVID AVILA*Mbiyimoh Ghogomu, left, with IBM CEO Ginni Rometty, center, and fellow IBMers Lindsey Barrett, Ryan Caruthers and Adam Tate, during the 2017 South by Southwest conference.*

Over the next year, Ghogomu worked on a number of other in-person experience projects, including a revamp of IBM's onboarding program for Design interns and new hires. Next, he spent a year as a "Designer in Residence," serving as executive assistant and apprentice to Phil Gilbert, general manager of IBM Design. Ghogomu learned a tremendous amount from Gilbert—including how to effectively prioritize.

Ghogomu recognized that IBM Design genuinely valued and promoted diversity, but he felt there was an opportunity to do more to ensure that the design hiring pipeline was itself diverse. With encouragement from Gilbert, who offered support and resources, Ghogomu led an effort to revamp IBM's process for recruiting young designers to include more candidates from UX and design "boot camps,"which attract more people of color than traditional design colleges.

Lift as You Climb

Ghogomu lives near downtown Austin with his girlfriend, Britany Gilman, who works at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. In his free time, he hikes, plays in a few adult basketball leagues and reads a lot of science fiction. He and some friends are also creating an online service for trading collectible sneakers in their free time.

Mbiyimoh Ghogomu, fourth from left, and his brother, Nsangou, second from right, with members of their extended family in Cameroon, in 2019.

A proponent of the "lift as you climb" approach, he makes time to mentor others, particularly young people of color. One frequent topic: "code switching," the controversial practice of changing how one talks, dresses or presents themselves to succeed in the corporate world.

"I say, 'Do whatever you need to do to get yourself in the door,'" he says. "Absolutely crush it. And then bring your full self to work. That is how you change stereotypes."

He also encourages expansive thinking, saying, "A lot of people paint themselves into a corner in the beginning of their career."

While writing the storyline of his own career, Ghogomu is guided by curiosity and a desire to learn. "I ask, 'What's going to be interesting?'" he says. "What's going to capture my attention? Most importantly, what's going to force me to acquire new skills and knowledge?"

His guiding philosophy: stay hungry. "I try to remind myself regularly of how much I dreamed of opportunities like this just a few years ago," he says. "In my experience, that's the best antidote for complacency."

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